GROWTH & SUSTAINABILITY 2 COMMENTS

Can Aldo Leopold's land ethic tackle our toughest problems?

An argument for 'voluntary decency.'

Michelle Nijhuis | ESSAY | Jan. 19, 2015 | *From the print edition* PRINT SHARE

In 1948, Aldo Leopold suffered a fatal heart attack while helping fight a fire on his neighbor's farm. The next year, thanks to the determined efforts of family and friends, Oxford University Press published a collection of his essays called *A Sand County Almanac*. In the decades since, it has become an environmental classic, and "The Land Ethic," one of its final essays, has woven itself so tightly into the language of American conservation that it's often quoted unconsciously, without attribution. Like the apocryphal playgoer who complains that *Hamlet* is full of clichés, first-time readers of "The Land Ethic" are sometimes surprised by its familiarity: So *that's* where that line comes from!

The endurance of Leopold's essay is at least partly explained by its eloquence. Plainspoken but poetic, dense in the best of ways, it has a practical Midwestern beauty that serves it well. It is complex yet eminently quotable, even in 140-character chunks. But it's also more than 60 years old. Today, decades after it was written, the Western

landscape faces forces almost too big to understand: urbanization, global energy demand, the compound effects of climate change on water and wildfire. Is Leopold's land ethic big enough to take t

Aldo Leopold with Flick, c. 1944. In lecture notes, Leopold wrote of "voluntary decency" as an essential element of conservation.

Courtesy The Aldo Leopold Foundation

"The Land Ethic" was the culmination of decades of thinking about conservation and, more broadly, about the relationship of people and nature. Leopold, a lifelong hunter and trained forester, recognized — and cherished — the practical benefits of nature. He accepted that people lived inside ecosystems, not apart from them. But he had also lived through the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, and seen the topsoil of southwestern Wisconsin, unmoored by drought and the profit motive, blow away and slip toward the sea. He understood, from bitter experience, how humans could fail nature. How, he wondered, could we do better by it?

"There must be some force behind conservation," Leopold mused in lecture notes from the 1940s. "More universal than profit, less awkward than government, less ephemeral than sport, somethi[illegible] eaches into all times and places. ... I can see only one such force: a respect for land as an organism; a voluntary decency in land-use exercised by every citizen and every land-owner out of a sense of love for and obligation to that great biota we call America."

Voluntary decency. That polite phrase doesn't appear in "The Land Ethic," but the essay is an argument for its necessity — and for its potential to power change at even the greatest scale. "A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided," Leopold wrote. "It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts. ... An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations."

Leopold thought that if Wisconsin farmers had a stronger sense of voluntary decency, they would have used the soil-conservation funds allocated by the state in the late 1930s for more than just immediately profitable measures. They would have improved their farming practices until their livelihoods, their neighbors' livelihoods, and the topsoil itself were protected for the long term. Many of us routinely accept such "obligations over and above self-interest" as members of the human community, Leopold observed. We fund schools not attended by our immediate family; we pay for roads not traveled. A land ethic, he argued, would simply extend that sense of obligation beyond people to the land itself — to what he called the entire "biotic community."

Leopold wrote most of "The Land Ethic" in a shored-up chicken coop on a desperately overworked piece of farmland on the Wisconsin River. The place he and his family called "the Shack" was, like "The Land Ethic" and many of his other writings, a product of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, the paramount ecological challenges of the day. After the Leopolds bought the land in 1935, they spent years struggling to revive it, planting hundreds of trees only to watch them be killed by drought. Eventually, they restored a patchwork of pines, hardwoods and prairie that survives today.

Leopold's response to the disasters of the 1930s was characteristic of his times. Char Miller, an environmental historian at California's Pomona College, points out that many of Leopold's contemporaries — composer Aaron Copland, filmmaker Pare Lorentz, anthropologist Margaret Mead — also sang the praises of simpler, close-to-the-ground living. But for Leopold, at least, going "back to the land" wasn't a retreat from the world's problems; it was an attempt to start solving them.

We, too, live in a time when ecological disaster seems very close and very real. It's tempting, perhaps even more now than then, to hide out in the metaphorical chicken coop. But Leopold's ethic is still working, covertly and overtly, against that urge. Leopold biographer Curt Meine, in the 2011 documentary *Green Fire*, finds the land ethic expressed in suburban prairie fragments, urban habitat-restoration projects, and similar efforts that aim to connect people with the nature of nearby places. Such connections, he says, foster the sort of voluntary decency Leopold described: a respect for nature, even in its most humble, altered and unlovely states, an awareness of one's place as a "plain member and citizen" of it, and a willingness to sacrifice time, money and effort on behalf of its lasting health.

Leopold knew that nature never had, and never would, exist in splendid isolation. While he spoke eloquently against a conservation strategy based on economic self-interest, he also distrusted purely preservationist arguments such as those advanced by Sierra Club founder John Muir. To Leopold, successful conservation required human connection to the land, and connection required use — respectful use, yes, and use for spiritual and aesthetic as well as economic benefits, but deliberate, active use. Even wilderness, he submitted, was a form of land use, perhaps the highest form of it. That seeming paradox is more relevant today than ever: We know, with greater and greater certainty, that it's impossible to put nature in quarantine — and equally impossible to survive without it.

"I think climate change, and the disruptions it's bringing to biological life, makes a preservationist impulse problematic," Miller says. "A conservation ethos that allows us to repair the dilemmas we've created is going to be much more useful in the coming century." Though that repair work requires us to muster yet more voluntary decency, it can create the connections that foster it, too.

When Leopold wrote "The Land Ethic," he was at the top of his field, revered for his pioneering work in forestry and wildlife science. He was also in poor health, suffering from a painful facial tic that resisted treatment. It's easy to see his most famous essay as the product of that confident mind and failing body: Despite Leopold's ambitious scope, he is careful to emphasize that his is far from the last word. "Nothing so important as an ethic is ever 'written,' " he concludes. Ethics evolve "in the minds of a thinking community," he believed, and do so slowly, amid more immediate obligations. ("Breakfast comes before ethics," he once told his daughter, Nina.)

Our challenge, then, is to continue — or better, accelerate — the evolution of the land ethic and the ideas that underpin it. Three generations after Leopold, we're even more distracted than the people of his time, and our environmental problems are in many ways vastly more complicated and pressing. The biotic community is as interconnected as ever, though our influences upon it are greater now, and voluntary decency must stretch to serve species and places we don't know and never will. But we can still start in the same place Leopold did: in the chicken coop, and with the problems of the backyard biota.

Is Aldo's land ethic big enough for the modern West? No. But without its propelling force, nothing else will be, either.

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This story was originally titled "Where's Aldo?" in the print edition.

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"I think climate change, and the disruptions it's bringing to biological life, makes a preservationist impulse problematic," Miller says. "A conservation ethos that allows us to repair the dilemmas we've created is going to be much more useful in the coming century."

More problematic is the currently popular notion that the same brawling drunks who tore apart the bar are now expected to clean the place up, yet while still far from sobriety. We'd be better off with an ethic that reminds us, correctly, that wherever we go, ecological degradation follows. It's been that way for millennia. Let us first experiment on smaller plots of land, in smaller subwatersheds, to see if we're able to make a living without wrecking the place. "Preservation," meanwhile, can and should serve as our scientific control.

Phaedra Greenwood Subscriber
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Excellent story! This is the only answer to the worldwide crisis in our biotic community. We need to rise above the impulse to take all we can for ourselves and consider what it will take for the survival of the entire community.

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